Standing for God:

Elijah's Concern for the Honor and Glory of God

"Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen" (1 Timothy 1:17).

Introduction

"Standing for God." Few phrases could better capture the life of the prophet Elijah, a man who lived in a time of deep spiritual darkness. Yet in the midst of that darkness, Elijah was called to rise and stand for God, boldly proclaiming His Word. We need not imagine that Elijah's generation was uniquely wicked or troubled, for human hearts have always wrestled with sin. The Apostle Paul reminded the believers in Philippi of this truth when he wrote, "Do all things without grumbling or disputing, that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast to the word of life" (Philippians 2:14–16). Every generation has been "crooked and twisted," yet in every age God calls His people to stand for Him and reflect His truth. Like Elijah, we too are called to take our stand for God, holding fast to His Word and letting His light be seen in the world around us.

Throughout his ministry, Elijah's life serves as a clear testimony of what it means to be motivated by a passion for God's glory. That passion repeatedly emerges as the primary motivation behind his service to the Lord. The purpose of this study is to analyze that theme as it first appears in 1 Kings 17, focusing on the historical context of his appearance, the significance of his message to King Ahab, and the various elements that form his burden to honor Jehovah.

Before moving forward, it is crucial to establish two key principles to guide our understanding of Elijah's life. First, as Paul reminded the Romans, "For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Romans 15:4). God's dealings with Elijah were recorded for our instruction, and we should expect these stories to serve as training in righteousness, preparing the man of God for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16–17). Second, the Apostle James reminds us that Elijah, despite the mighty work of the Spirit of God in his ministry, was a man of like nature with us (James 5:16–18). This is intended to be a great

encouragement. The lessons of faith Elijah learned are the very lessons we are called to learn. Although the spiritual conditions of his time appeared vastly different on the surface, they were not so unlike our own.

The Historical and Spiritual Context of Elijah's Appearance

To understand the significance of Elijah's prophetic ministry, we first need to recognize the specific historical moment when he appeared. His appearance in 1 Kings 17 is sudden and impactful, but the Word of God offers plenty of information in the earlier chapters about the events leading up to his arrival. These events clearly demonstrate how important that moment was in Israel's history and how urgently a prophet was needed to speak God's truth to the people.

Ahab became the king of the northern kingdom of Israel about fifty-seven years after the twelve tribes split following Solomon's reign. That division created two kingdoms: Judah in the south, ruled by Rehoboam, Solomon's son, and Israel in the north, led by Jeroboam, who had once served Solomon before leading a rebellion against him. The two kingdoms often fought each other until Jehoshaphat of Judah formed a disastrous alliance with Ahab, as recorded in 2 Chronicles 18.

What is especially notable in the chapters leading up to chapter 17 of 1 Kings is a clear pattern of increasing wickedness among the kings of the northern kingdom. The phrase "and sinned more than all those before him" appears almost like a refrain as the story moves from one king to the next. The specific sins most often mentioned trace back to Jeroboam, the first king after the division of the tribes. His two main sins, idolatry and founding an unauthorized priesthood to serve at the idols, became so typical of the northern monarchy that Scripture calls them collectively "the sins of the house of Jeroboam."[1] Each subsequent king, Nadab, Baasha, Elah, Zimri, and Omri, is judged by this standard, and sadly, all are found to have followed the same path.

Then comes Ahab. The inspired writer states in 1 Kings 16:30 that he "did more evil in the eyes of the Lord than any of those before him." If that verdict alone were not damning enough, the following verses emphasize the case further. Ahab's attitude toward sin reveals far

[1] See 1 Kings 12:26–33 and 13:33–34 for a description of King Jeroboam's evil acts.

more than his actions ever could. It reveals the condition of his heart, a heart that had grown dull to God's truth and comfortable with disobedience. Verse 31 reveals to us that he considered the sins of Jeroboam to be trivial, a small matter. You can learn a great deal about the spiritual state of any person, regardless of age, from how they view sin. To Ahab, sin was insignificant. The contrast with the Apostle Paul could not be more striking. When Paul walked through Athens and saw the city full of idols, the Scripture says, "his spirit was provoked within him" (Acts 17:16). That distress is exactly the disposition that concern for God's glory creates in those who feel it, and it is the very disposition we will see in Elijah.

Ahab not only ignored his predecessors' sins; he carried wickedness to new depths. He married Jezebel, the daughter of Ethbaal, king of the Sidonians. Her name, meaning "Baal is prince," and her father's name, meaning "with him is Baal," emphasize the importance of this union for Israel. Through this marriage, the worship of the Phoenician and Canaanite deity Baal was not just tolerated but officially endorsed. Ahab built an altar for Baal and erected a temple in his honor. He also set up an Asherah pole, linked to Baal worship and believed to represent Baal's female consort and the Canaanite fertility goddess[2].

Israel was explicitly commanded by God in Exodus to remove such poles when entering Canaan. The overall outcome, both clear and tragic, is summarized in 1 Kings 16:33, which states that Ahab "did more to provoke the LORD, the God of Israel, to anger than all the kings of Israel who were before him." One final detail reveals Israel's rejection of God. 1 Kings 16:34 states that during Ahab's reign, a man named Hiel rebuilt the city of Jericho, fulfilling the curse Joshua had pronounced on anyone who did so (Joshua 6:26). There is no doubt that this was not an act of ignorance but one of bold defiance and blatant disrespect for God's commandments. As Roger Ellsworth notes in his analysis of this period, these were times of great darkness and sinfulness among God's covenant people, and in many ways, God's righteous judgment was approaching. He writes,

[2] An Asherah pole was a wooden symbol associated with Asherah, the Canaanite goddess of fertility and the sea, often regarded in the ancient Near East as the female companion of Baal. These poles were typically carved wooden posts erected near altars as objects of worship, and their presence in Israel represented a direct violation of the covenant command to have no other gods and to destroy the high places of Canaan. The law of Moses explicitly prohibited Israel from planting any kind of tree as an Asherah pole beside the altar of the Lord (Deuteronomy 16:21), making Ahab's installation of one in Samaria an act of deliberate and public defiance against the covenant.

> Why did the author of this book include this verse about the rebuilding of Jericho's walls? After all, we hear nothing more about Hiel throughout the rest of Scripture. The reason was that, in a single verse, as if with a single stroke of the brush, the author paints a picture for his readers of how desperate the times were when Elijah had to prophesy. Now we see how far into sin Ahab and the nation had gone. Not only was the worship of Baal being promoted and practiced, but the Word of God was treated with scorn and contempt.[3]

Elijah Appears Before Ahab

Against the backdrop of increasing apostasy and growing spiritual darkness, Elijah suddenly steps onto the stage of history. 1 Kings 17:1 introduces him briefly: "Now Elijah the Tishbite, from Tishbe in Gilead, said to Ahab ..." The scripture provides no detailed biography, no story of his calling, no preamble. He simply appears on the scene. All we know is that he was from Tishbe in Gilead, a region east of the Jordan River known for its rugged, wild hill country, where the people were accustomed to hardship and outdoor struggles. F.W. Krummacher offers us helpful background information. He writes,

> Elijah owed not his greatness to high birth or station, or a native place of renown. He was born, as we see from the text, among the mountains of Gilead, on the other side Jordan; a region which, though famous for its plants, and its balms and spices, was mostly inhabited by blind idolators, and overspread with the abominations of the Amorites. It lay not far from the country of the Gergesenes, where, in the time of our Lord, the devils entered into the swine; and it may be supposed that, unless from extreme necessity, no Israelite would take up his dwelling among these mountains. It was probably in some poor abode, possibly in a wretched banished Jewish family, that Elijah was born and brought up. His birthplace, Tishe, may be considered as only a mean and obscure village in the mountains; and the prophet in his childhood could not have known much of schools, or seats of learning, or of worldly grandeur. But it has constantly been the way of our God in all ages, to take those by whom he purposes to do great things rather out of the dust than from off the throne, that all may see how everything depends upon his choice, and know that flesh and blood have not wrought his mighty works, but that to him alone belongs the glory. Hence it was that he thus prepared, in Gilead, the balm which should recover the health of the daughter of Zion; and in that den of murderers, the country of the Amorites, he raised up the man by whose instrumentality he proposed to beat down altars, execute judgment upon kings, and destroy the priests of Baal. If we translate the word 'Tishbite,' it means a converter; and how well does this name befit the whole life and vocation of our prophet![4]

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[3] Roger Ellsworth, *Standing for God* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1994), 14.
[4] F.W. Krummacher, *Elijah the Tishbite* (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1838), 14.

Elijah's very name carries great meaning. It means "Jehovah is my God," a declaration that, in the context of Ahab's Baal-worshiping Israel, was itself an act of rebellion and faith. The name indicates at least two things. First, that his parents worshiped and feared the true God and raised him with that knowledge. Second, and more broadly, his name seems to reflect his purpose and message to Israel: to restore the honor and glory of Jehovah among his people. In a kingdom where the main message was that Baal is the prince, Elijah's life and ministry publicly declared that Jehovah is God through his very name. Elijah was nothing if not passionate.

This sense of duty to God's honor and glory clearly shines through in his words to Ahab. His oath, "As the Lord, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve," demonstrates the commitment of a man for whom God is a living reality, not just a theological idea. Elijah swears only to Jehovah and dedicates his service solely to Him. Later in the story, Elijah will express this passion directly when he says, "I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts" (1 Kings 19:10). That zeal is already evident from his first appearance. We can almost hear the conviction behind his words when he would later face the false prophets on Mount Carmel: "Let it be known this day that you are God in Israel."[5] He is declaring to all that the God of Israel lives. He is Jehovah. The true and living God.

Inseparable from this zeal was Elijah's remarkable boldness in appearing before Ahab at all. The prophets of Baal held the court's favor. Jezebel actively persecuted the prophets of the Lord. For a man who served the true God to come before so wicked a king required a courage that does not come from temperament alone. Proverbs 28:1 captures this trait well: "The wicked flee when no one pursues, but the righteous are bold as a lion." It is righteousness, not mere bravado, that produces this kind of courage.

Arthur Pink makes a further point that Elijah's consciousness of the presence of God, the awareness embedded in the very phrase "whom I serve," or as the Authorized Version renders it, "before whom I stand," was the source of his fearlessness in the presence of the king. He writes,

> As the Lord God of Israel liveth, before whom I stand. Elijah was not only assured of the reality of Jehovah's existence, but he was conscious of being in His presence. Though appearing before the person of Ahab, the prophet knew he was in the presence of One infinitely greater than any earthly monarch, even Him

[5] 1 Kings 18:36

> before whom the highest angels bow in adoring worship. Gabriel himself could not make a grander avowal (Luke 1.19). Ah, my reader, such a blessed assurance as this lifts us above all fear. If the Almighty was with him, why should the prophet tremble before a worm of the earth! The Lord God of Israel liveth: 'before whom I stand' clearly reveals the foundation on which his soul rested as he executed his unpleasant task.[6]

The Message of Judgment and the Hope of Repentance

Filled with zeal for God's glory and strengthened by an awareness of His divine presence, Elijah delivers his message to Ahab: there will be no dew or rain in Israel except at his command. This was not an arbitrary declaration. An Israelite familiar with the Law of Moses would have immediately recognized it as the direct application of the covenant curses against idolatry. Deuteronomy 11:16–17 clearly warned that if Israel turned away to serve other gods, the Lord's anger would burn against them and He would shut the heavens so that no rain would fall. Elijah was not inventing a new punishment. He was announcing the fulfillment of one warned long ago.

It is worth pausing here to notice the irony in this judgment. Baal was believed to be the god of nature, responsible for the sun and rain, and the main male deity of the Phoenicians and Canaanites. Israel had turned away from Jehovah to worship a god of rain and fertility. Now, Jehovah, the living God, was about to demonstrate in a very clear way who truly rules the heavens. The withholding of rain would be a powerful witness to Baal's impotence and Jehovah's sovereign rule over all creation.

It is vital that we remember that passion for God's glory does not end in seeking judgment on sinners. Elijah's zeal had a redemptive purpose at its core. The drought was meant to produce something. The prophet's main desire was for God to awaken Israel and lead them to repentance, so that they would turn away from Baal and return to the Lord. This longing is a recurring theme among the Old Testament prophets. Amos, describing similar discipline from the Lord, concludes each section with the somber phrase "yet you did not return to me" (Amos 4:7–8). The goal of judgment was always to restore the people. Elijah's prayer for drought,

[6] Arthur W. Pink, *The Life of Elijah* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1991), 25.

which James tells us was fervent (James 5:17–18), was ultimately a plea for God to revive the hearts of His people.

This directly influences how we understand our own calling in a corrupt and depraved generation. It is not enough just to mourn the wickedness of the age, or even to desire God's judgment upon it. We must long for salvation to reach sinners. We need to pray for spiritual awakening, so that many will realize their sin and their desperate need for forgiveness. Our witness in the world, like Elijah's before Ahab, should be rooted in a desire for God's honor and glory, so that, as Paul wrote to the Philippians, every tongue might confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:11). This must be our chief objective.

The Elements of Elijah's Concern for God's Glory

As we look at Elijah's first appearance in 1 Kings 17, several qualities stand out, forming his burden for God's honor and glory. They are worth examining because they serve as a pattern for us just as much as they describe him.

The most visible of these is his hatred for sin. Elijah's very appearance before Ahab with a message of judgment reflects a man who cannot look upon Israel's idolatry with indifference. Unlike Ahab, for whom sin was a minor issue, Elijah was deeply troubled by it. A sincere concern for God's glory should lead us to feel grief over anything that dishonors Him.

It is always the case that those who love God feel grief over the ungodliness they see in the world around them. Peter reminds us of this when he describes Lot as a righteous man whose soul was daily troubled by the wickedness he witnessed in Sodom.[7] What troubled Lot was not merely the inconvenience of living among difficult neighbors. It was the sight of sin itself, and what it meant in the presence of a holy God.

Our world, of course, views sin as a minor issue, something to be managed, excused, or in some cases celebrated! But the cross of Christ does not permit us that comfort. There, in the death of God's own Son, we see the true measure of what sin costs and how seriously God regards it. The cross is God's own commentary on the severity of human rebellion and sin. This

[7] 2 Peter 2:7–8.

is expressed in a stanza taken from the classic hymn *"Stricken, Smitten, and Afflicted"* by Thomas Kelly.

> "Ye who think of sin but lightly,
> Nor suppose the evil great;
> Here may view its nature rightly,
> Here its guilt may estimate."

If we profess faith in the Lord Jesus Christ yet feel no distress over our sin, something is deeply wrong and demands our immediate attention. Let us turn our gaze once more to the cross of our blessed Savior, where we see the staggering price paid for the redemption of our eternal souls.

Rooted in the grief of sin and connected to it is a deep awareness of God's presence. The phrase "whom I serve" or "before whom I stand" is not accidental. It reveals a man who lives with a constant sense of the divine nearness. This is not a mystical achievement reserved for exceptional saints. It is the result of a faithful devotional life, including prayer and meditation on God's Word, and it forms the foundation for all genuine boldness in service.

That boldness is worth noticing on its own. Elijah did not wait for perfect conditions before he proclaimed the word of the Lord. He entered the court of the most wicked king Israel had ever seen and delivered his message without hesitation. The righteous are as bold as a lion, and this boldness is not the absence of fear but the presence of a greater fear, the fear of God that overpowers the fear of man.

It is clear that what prevented Elijah's zeal from turning into mere anger was a sincere desire for repentance and change. This stems from love and concern for the Lord's people. The purpose of the drought was not to destroy for its own sake but to wake up a people who had strayed far from God. This redemptive goal is what sets apart godly zeal from mere prideful indignation. True concern for God's glory and His people always includes a longing to restore those who have dishonored Him.

At the core of all this is prayer. James emphasizes Elijah not just as a preacher or miracle worker, but as a man who prayed earnestly. The desperate spiritual state of Israel drove the prophet to his knees. This raises a direct question for us. Does the spiritual condition of the

church, our nation, and our families motivate us to sincere prayer? Or have we grown comfortable with spiritual darkness?

None of these qualities is exclusive to an Old Testament prophet. They are the characteristics of any life truly driven by concern for God's honor and glory. Elijah was, as James reminds us, a man just like us. The question his life raises is whether we, like him, are willing to stand for God in the crooked and corrupt generation in which we live.

In the study that follows, we will trace Elijah’s steps as he leaves Ahab's court and is led by God into the wilderness, where the Lord teaches him the meaning of total dependence through the daily exercise of faith.